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No Impact Man Colin Beavan Addresses President's Convocation

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BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – Author Colin Beavan had a message for the students of Illinois Wesleyan University on Wednesday at the President's Convocation: No one has to make a choice between helping the planet and helping themselves.

“We have this idea in our culture that you can help, or you can take care of yourself. You can be a monk or a merchant, but you can't be both,” said Beavan, who is famed for chronicling a year he and his family spent trying to live without negatively impacting the environment. Addressing the audience in Westbrook Auditorium, Beavan explained people give themselves the “false choice” of either following their passion to help others, or thinking they need to be “realistic” and care only for themselves. “There is more than this ‘you can do good or you can make money’ concept. The idea that you have to choose between doing for yourself and doing for others comes from a supreme lack of creativity.”

Creativity is something Beavan does not lack. He is known for his adventurous No Impact Project, during which Beavan, his wife and their daughter spent a year trying to produce no trash, going without electricity, riding in no cars or taxis, eating only locally produced food, and avoiding all paper products while living in New York City. He wrote of their efforts in his blog and book *No Impact Man: The Adventures of a Guilty Liberal Who Attempts to Save the Planet and Discoveries He Makes About Himself and Our Way of Life in the Process* (Picador, 2009). “I responded to the world's problems in a way that aligned with my own passions and talents,” he said.

Most of the audience had read Beavan's book. It was the required Summer Reading for incoming Illinois Wesleyan first-year students. “I really, really want to thank all of you who did not enjoy the book,” joked Beavan. “It's one thing for an author to have someone find their book in a store and want to read it. It's another for someone to be required to read it and enjoy it. But it's really something when people who are required to read it, do not enjoy it, and keep reading.”

In the book, Beavan shared how he nearly stumbled into developing the No Impact Project as a response to his reaction to the 1990s war in Iraq. Beavan had recently finished writing a book about tortures committed during World War II, when he heard of U.S. soldiers accused of torturing Iraqis. “I was so angry,” he recalled. “I knew if we were going to have a war, we were going to have torture.” Beavan said he focused his anger on the belief the war was simply a way to maintain a life built on oil consumption. Walking into his air-conditioned-cooled apartment one day, however, he had the epiphany that he was part of the problem. “I realized if I could not wait 20 minutes to have my apartment cool down, so that I had to run two air conditioners in my apartment all day, then maybe I led a life that requires people to fight for it.”

His answer was the No Impact Project, which has drawn international attention. Interest in his efforts also helped start the not-for-profit No Impact Experiment, which offers a template for others to follow Beavan's project on their own or in groups. Illinois Wesleyan will conduct a [No Impact Week](#) from Sept. 12-19.

During his time on the project, Beavan learned that although American society has become more consumption-centered over the decades, our levels of happiness have not risen. Yet he found his own level of contentment rose as he spent more time with his family. “Instead of coming together in front of the TV, shoveling bad, chemical-laden, take-out food in our mouths and not talking to each other, the kitchen table became the center of our lives,” he said, noting the project made him reassess not only his own consumption, but also the priorities of a consumption-driven society. “I discovered what I called ‘happier people, happier planet’ theory,” he said. “If we look for ways to live better for the planet, then we discover aspects of a better life.”

Media worldwide have interviewed Beavan about the project. Though he and his family are the focus of so much international attention, Beavan dismissed the idea that he is a true celebrity. “This is not about a smart man who knew what he was doing,” he said. “This is a story of a person who was too stupid to know he could not make a difference.” When beginning the experiment, Beavan said he thought he would only change his own habits, not inspire permanent change within himself and others. Now that millions of people have visited his blog, purchased his book and replicated his No Impact Project, Beavan said he sees how easily people can help one another. “The question is not, ‘Am I the type of person to make a difference,’” he said. “The question is, ‘Am I the type of person who wants to try.’”

He called on the audience to ask themselves how they want to be remembered. “For me, I had to ask myself what I want to see on my tombstone, ‘He had enough money for a bigger house’?” said Beavan, urging all to find a way to change their lives without thinking they are giving up anything that makes them truly happy. “I don’t believe in depriving ourselves for the planet. I believe that the human spirit is aspiration and ambitious,” he said. “The idea is not to make ourselves small for the planet. The idea is just the opposite. Let’s make ourselves bigger. Let’s actually develop a way of life where working for ourselves does not mean we are not working for others around us.”

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